

Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children

Willie Martindale's Strange Adventure With a Little Man Who Was Once the Jack of Spades

WILLIE MARTINDALE was lying in the hammock in the shade of a tree, and was very wide awake. This was quite certain, because he remembers that he was pulling a string to swing himself when it all happened. Suddenly he heard a faint but very clear voice below, and, peering over the edge of the hammock, he was astonished to behold a tiny man, in the oddest costume, standing there and looking up at him inquiringly. The little man said:

"Upon careful inspection and calm consideration, I would pronounce you to be Willie."

"Yes, I am Willie," replied the boy. "And who might you be?"

"I might be, I suppose, the left wheel of a turtle or the spigot of a semicircle, if you'll excuse my vanity; but it happens that I am neither of these, nor yet am I a nonentity. Here I am, merely a sort of a man, so to speak; but I was the Jack of Spades until your sister Anna cut me out from the card and let me go abroad to study human nature a bit."

Willie now recognized the costume and examined the Jack of Spades with interest. He had never seen such odd clothes before, except in pictures of ancient personages, and he realized how very old the playing cards must be as soon as he saw the curious flat cap, the long hair and the short jacket covered with gilt figures, with a wide scarf from the shoulder to the belt of gems and the sword, while the dagger worn by the little man showed that he belonged to a period when men were in the habit of fighting upon the smallest provocation. He resolved to not to anger the Jack, and said very politely:

"Will you swing in the hammock?"

"You should address me as 'Prince!'" exclaimed the tiny man. "I am, you must recollect, the son of the King of Spades! I am also a poet," he added, as he stepped upon Willie's extended hand. "I am even now composing a little set of verses upon your sister Anna, and I will recite them if you desire it."

Willie, although he hated poetry, said that he would be glad to listen to them, for he didn't wish to offend even so small a man who carried a sword and a dagger. He remembered that a hornet, with its minute attachment, can make a deal of trouble. The Jack sat down on the boy's sleeve and began:

Heaven was a merry maid—
Who's Anna was she? Alas!
A lass she was, but unafraid
Of hose or leggings.
Of things amiss she was a miss
Who doesn't care a jot.
Although a snitch or little might
Have mattered a mighty lot—

"That's as far as I've got as yet, but I'll finish it this evening and give you the rest. What do think of it?"

"It's pretty good—that is, I think it's bully!" replied Willie, thinking he saw the Prince's hand steal toward the sword. "What does it mean when it's all finished?"

"Mean! It's not mean!" cried the Jack.

"What does it imply?"

"I do not understand," replied the Jack, haughtily. "It's not paper. Neither imply, two-ply or three-ply. It's verse—poems—can't you comprehend that?"

"I am afraid you do not fully grasp the meaning of words," said Willie, "for you use them very carelessly indeed."

"I use words just as I use my best clothes," said the Prince.

"But, of course, you try to express some meaning," asked Willie.

"Express meaning! Why, certainly not! I can get an express company to do that!" retorted the Prince, scornfully. "I seldom do, however."

"Meanings are not packages!" cried the boy. "You can't send words by express!"

"Oh, I see what you mean! You mean the use of words," said the Jack. "I have not many words to use, thank goodness! All I have I got from two pages of a book in which I was placed for a few weeks by mistake. I use the same words for several things, but principally about foxes, you know."

"About foxes!" exclaimed Willie. "Why about foxes?"

"Because the book was about them. It told of their habits, at least the two pages did with which I was so familiar, and I think I know all there is to be learned concerning that interesting animal, except what it looks like, for that part was on another page, you see, and so I wouldn't recognize a fox if I met one."

"I have seen them in cages," said the boy, "and once, when I was at my grandfather's, one came and stole chickens."

"I did not read about that!" exclaimed the Jack, looking at Willie with some suspicion.

"Well, of course, you couldn't read everything about an animal in two pages," replied the boy. "Whole books are written about foxes."

"I never thought of that! I suspect I could have learned a lot, too, in another book in which I was placed for two days. It was about magic, and I wish I had learned more. All I saw was one page opposite a beautiful picture of a conjurer turning brass into gold."

"My!" exclaimed Willie. "What did you learn?"

"Merely how to change one thing into another," said Willie. "How did you do it?"

"You just say 'OPANKUM ESTO FRUM,' and add what you wish done, keeping your fingers out

Just as the Dogs Surrounded Them



straight, for if they happen to be crossed it won't work at all. That's the way, also, to prevent anybody changing you against your wishes, as I read on that same page."

"Gee!" cried the boy. "I'll try it at once! 'OPANKUM ESTO FRUM!' I wish I were as small as you!"

In a twinkling he was as tiny as the Jack, and the sides of the hammock, stretching up against the blue sky, seemed like the sweep of a gigantic red wave, while each strand of the cordage was an immense rope as thick as his leg. He moved along the meshes, stepping from one to the other carefully to avoid falling through, and, followed closely by the Jack of Spades, at last came to a loose cord that hung down to the grass, and down they both slid at once. When on the ground, overshadowed by the tall grass like a canebrake, he breathed a sigh of relief at his escape from so dangerous a position, and then said:

"Well, what shall we do now?"

The Prince replied: "Let's go and see if we can find a fox!"

"Are you crazy?" asked the boy. "Foxes don't stay around houses in the city!"

"Well, we'll go into the forest," replied the Jack. "That will be easy, won't it?"

"I suppose we might slip on a trolley car without being seen," said Willie, starting off toward the gate, but before he had taken five steps he started back in affright, for a cat was stealing through the tall grass a few yards away, her gaze intent upon a sparrow which was twittering and scolding on the lowest bar of the gate. She did not observe the boys, but both suffered a severe shock when they realized their danger, for they knew she would have taken them for dainty tidbits had she seen them crouching there in the shadow. They waited breathlessly until she had dashed at the bird, and not catching him, ran along the top of the fence and vanished.

"That was a narrow escape!" whispered Willie.

"Huh!" said the Jack. "I would have changed myself into a cat again!"

"Never thought of that!" replied Willie. "I might have changed into a big bulldog, and then you would have seen a cat as scared as we were, or much more so, perhaps."

"I have yet to see a bull or a bulldog," said the Prince, "although there was something in the book of magic about a charmed bull-et."

"That's a different thing entirely!" retorted Willie, somewhat scornfully, for he couldn't get used to the Jack's handling of language. "I do wish that I had remembered the charm and said it!"

"Well, shall we go on?" asked the Prince, glancing through the grass.

"I guess it is safe now," replied Willie. "I'll go in front, for I know the way."

"Do you think we can get on one of those cars you spoke about?" inquired the Jack, anxiously, as he followed the boy rather timidly. "You know I can't walk very well as yet, and I don't know a thing about jumping or climbing!"

"At least we can try. Follow me," answered Willie.

He led the way, but with much difficulty, through the grass to the gate, gazing up as they passed along at the immense trees, fences and other objects in the garden with great interest, for it seemed incredible that a mere broom or a pail could be so enormous, and, finally, when a trolley car happened to stop directly in front of the house, they managed to climb up on the front steps without being seen by the motorman and slipped under a seat.

"I don't know about that," she replied, musingly. "Food is getting very scarce and you are not old enough to hunt yet."

"Still, we know so much about houses and people we may be able to provide, not only for ourselves, but for you also," replied Jack, pompously, for he almost forgot about being a baby fox.

"That's true, perhaps," she said. "I was once inside of a house and very nearly caught, too. Remain here until my husband returns, and we will see what he says about it."

Papa Fox returned in a few minutes with a chicken slung over his shoulder, and was very much surprised to see two more babies at home. When his wife had explained he asked the boys many questions regarding the inside of a house, and was astonished to see how much they knew. He agreed at once to let them live with him, as he was sure they would be very useful.

"Step inside and share our dinner with us," said he, smilingly, "and this afternoon we will all go

hunting together, as the children are now old enough to take their first lesson."

Willie and Jack followed him into the den and took their places. It smelt dreadfully in there, and Willie was almost smothered at first, but soon became accustomed to the odor of the den and forgot all about it when he received his share of the chicken, which he ate just as any baby fox would.

After dinner they all followed old Papa Fox into the fields, where he showed the youngsters how to catch field-mice and hunt the woodchuck, although they didn't capture the latter, as he is almost as smart as any fox. Papa Fox knew where all the bridges were that crossed the streams, as well as the most convenient stepping stones, too, for he hates to wet his feet. He was well posted regarding all the hen-roosts and hen-coops for miles around, and, as he told the children, he never visited the same ones in the same week; and, strange to say, he was well acquainted with many of the farmers' dogs.

"It's rather difficult," said he, "to get in with them at first, for they always seem to mistrust me and to think I am after their master's chickens, but I rarely fail to win them over, and when I was younger I used to spend hours every day in gambling and scampering about the fields with them. After all, that's not wonderful, for I think we are really cousins. I suspect they poison their minds against us when they are little, for they do seem to hate foxes. Now we will go over to the meadow and see if we can surprise a woodchuck."

They soon saw a woodchuck sitting beside his burrow, but he saw them as quickly and uttered a loud, shrill cry of alarm before he bolted into the opening. Papa Fox hurried, but he couldn't reach him, and then he settled down to dig him out. Every few minutes he would back out of the hole to stare over to another entrance, which was the woodchuck's back door, and the fox rather expected the animal would try to escape that way, while at every other burrow's opening sat a woodchuck, making a great outcry to warn all the tribe that a fox was present.

Suddenly the distant bark of a dog was heard, a long, ringing, musical bark that told wily, wily Papa Fox that hounds had scented his trail and were following him, as the hounds frequently do, just for fun or perhaps for practice, and he came out of the woodchuck's hole like a bullet from a gun.

"Hurry!" he shouted to Mamma Fox. "Get the children home, while I lead the dogs in another direction."

Off he darted with the youngsters, but Willie and Jack remained with Papa Fox, determined to see the fun, for that's just what the fox considered it, as far as he was concerned, for he loved to race the dogs and play all manner of tricks upon them to show his cunning.

At first he listened to determine from the dogs' course whether they were after him or some other fox; then making certain that he was the one wanted, he stretched himself out and started off rather leisurely, looking back from time to time. Willie and Jack followed him easily, and yet with some alarm, as the dogs were nearing them, but Papa Fox seemed totally unconscious.

Soon the pack, eight dogs, appeared, bursting through the underbrush and clearing the stone wall in a bunch, and a loud bay came from every mouth as they increased their speed, seeing the three foxes in front. Then old Papa Fox hustled a bit and soon was far ahead again, after which he turned, retracing his steps for a distance, then rang far to one side and to the top of a rail fence, along which he ran

How a Magic Spell Changed Them Into Anything They Wished, and the Fun They Had

very cleverly for some distance and then jumped to a pile of rocks and away in another direction. The two lads followed, imitating all his actions, until he suddenly sat down in a little hollow.

"In the winter," said he, panting just a trifle, "I often lead the dogs across a pond where the ice is so thin that they break through and sometimes drown. I don't enjoy this sort of thing so much when the snow is on the ground, for it is very difficult to run fast, but it's fun in the summer."

"But suppose they tire you out completely?" said Willie.

"Oh, I always have three or four dens to retreat to, as a rule. Of course, I am pretty hard pushed at times, but so far I have always managed to escape quite easily."

He suddenly crouched and hunched his back, peering into the grass below. His early-Autumn coat of red fur bristled and his back legs trembled slightly, while his eyes gleamed with a dull fire. Willie stared and soon saw a quail making his way through the rag-weed at a little distance.

Forgetting all about the hounds, Papa Fox crept toward the bird slowly, but just as he was about to spring upon it the dogs swept over the pile of rocks led by an old hunter named Sandy, who knew every trick of Reynard's very well, and without noticing either Willie or Jack they sprang at the old rascal with a grand chorus of joyful bays. He leaped for his life and with incredible swiftness sped away, leaving the boys crouching there in the grass in a stupor of fright, for several of the dogs bounded toward them as soon as the rest of the pack started after Papa Fox.

These dogs, who were mostly young ones, were almost upon them when Willie thought of the magic spell, and he instantly yelled with all his might:

"Opankum Estu Frum. I want to be a boy again!"

"So do I, quick, too!" echoed Jack, and there they stood in the midst of an astonished group of dogs, who stared all about for the foxes, two boys again, Willie as he had always been, and Jack a handsome lad, but dressed in those ancient clothes that made him look just like a playing card.

The dogs seemed very much disappointed at losing their prey, and although Willie tried to make friends with them they were apparently surly and distrustful, like most fox-hounds, and in a moment ran off after the others. The boys mounted a hill to see if they could spy Papa Fox fleeing before his enemies, but they never saw him again, and soon they walked back through the forest and took the trolley car home, where the Jack of Spades promptly took Willie's advice and got into a suit of modern clothes, for the way the people stared at him made him uncomfortable.

When Anna saw him she did not recognize the handsome lad as the picture which she had cut from a playing-card, and she was very much impressed by his appearance, but she, too, was much annoyed at his loose use of words. When she learned who he was she became his teacher, and pretty soon he was learning not only words, but geography, grammar, arithmetic and all the other studies from her, while to support himself and repay the Martindale family for their care and attention, he changed cobble-stones into pearls, tin pans into gold dishes, copper coins into gold eagles and broken glass into big diamonds, so that they all become very rich, indeed.

The old wagon became a great forty-horse-power automobile, the old piano a magnificent Grand Hoopshooper, the lace curtains in the windows became silken tapestries and the carpets gorgeous Persian and Turkish rugs.

If the dinner was not to their taste Jack or Willie promptly altered it to something else; if the scenery from a window was tiresome it was changed; even the weather was arranged thereafter to suit the Martindale family, and as nobody else knew anything about it, nobody protested at all. Anna was perhaps the most delighted of all of them, for, to oblige her, the Prince changed her costume several times each week, so that she was the envy of all the girls in the town. They even had the pleasure of changing Mr. Martindale's rheumatism into something else, but what it was I do not know. I only know it was something far less painful.

It was at this time that I made his acquaintance and became so much interested in him, for it is a wonderful thing to become a living human being after having been a mere playing card for years. I found him a very pleasant, bright fellow, indeed, and after he had told me the story much as Willie had done, I asked him what he intended to do in the future.

In return he asked me many questions about the duties of grown men, how they had to work, keep appointments, hustle around for money, meet all sorts of disagreeable people and do all sorts of unpleasant things, and when I had concluded he laughed and said:

"I think I will remain a boy."

But of course he had to grow up; he couldn't help it, but he always lived with Willie as his brother and they were very happy. There were no other boys in that neighborhood half so nice, as I well know.

Once in a while the two would change themselves into different things and have all sorts of wonderful adventures, about which I will tell you as soon as I hear about them, but I would caution every little boy or girl never to use this magic spell, as, perhaps, after you have changed yourself into a goat, or a rhinoceros, for instance, you might forget the words and have to remain in that shape for years and years, as another boy did who learned the spell from Willie Martindale.

WALT McDUGALL.